

## Lesson 7: The Columbian Exchange

### **Columbian Exchange: Effect 1**

When European explorers and settlers followed Christopher Columbus to the Americas they brought diseases with them that had never existed there before. Because Native Americans had not been exposed to these diseases they were very vulnerable to them. Diseases like smallpox were dangerous to Europeans and Africans (Old World people) but they were even worse for Native Americans (New World people).

On the other hand, diseases like influenza and measles were serious but less dangerous to Europeans and Africans. However, they were still deadly to Native Americans. Even relatively minor illnesses for Europeans, like chicken pox, killed Native Americans. The result was a huge loss of life for Native Americans. There may have been 90 million people living in the Americas when Columbus arrived. Many scientists today think that fifty years after European settlement began that less than ten million Native Americans were left. This means their population had shrunk by over 90%! While scientists still argue today whether any diseases went from America to Europe and Africa there is no question that the Old World disease devastated the people of the New World.

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### Columbian Exchange: Effect 2

When Europeans came to the Americas they brought animals with them that had not existed there before. They also found American animals that were not in their homelands. The people of Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) had more domesticated animals than the people of the New World (the Americas). Domesticated animals are animals that are not wild. Cattle, pigs, goats, chickens, dogs, cats, and horses are good examples of domesticated animals. Wolves, deer, and bears are examples of animals that are not domesticated.

Native Americans had never seen cattle, pigs, goats, chickens, and domesticated cats. Native Americans did domesticate dogs and llamas. Some scientists think they may also have domesticated ducks in some areas. The animals the Europeans brought changed the New World. Horses, oxen, donkeys, and mules were working animals that changed how people travelled, hunted, fought, moved heavy loads, and plowed fields. Cattle, pigs, goats, and chickens provided new sources of food through meat, milk, cheese, or eggs. The Native Americans of the Great Plains became among the finest horsemen in the world after that animal arrived in their lands. The horse allowed them to hunt bison so much more easily that they reduced the amount of farming they did in order to hunt them instead. Today the Americas are famous for beef, pork, and chicken production. The American way of life has been closely tied to the use of horse for hundreds of years. All of this is a result of the animals the Europeans brought with them.

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### **Columbian Exchange: Effect 3**

The people of the Old World (Europeans and Africans) who followed Columbus to the New World (the Americas) brought their religious belief systems with them. Native Americans already had a huge variety of ancient religious systems that they followed. Many of the Native Americans would hold on to their original religions for centuries and some still do today. However, the European settlers' religions, especially Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant), became dominant over time as more and more Europeans arrived and Native Americans converted to Christianity.

The Catholic nations, Spain, Portugal, and France sent missionaries to convince Native Americans to follow the Catholic religion. Protestant nations, England and the Netherlands also worked to convert the natives. These efforts were very effective over time. Today the populations of North and South America are overwhelmingly Christian. Other Old World religions (Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism) have also arrived in the Americas with the immigrants who believed in them. Many modern Native Americans have tried to preserve their original beliefs but overall today's America is dominated by Old World religions.

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### **Columbian Exchange: Effect 4**

European explorers and settlers quickly realized how rich the New World (the Americas) was in resources. A major reason that led European leaders to establish colonies in the Americas was to gain control of these resources. The Spanish were able to become Europe's richest and most powerful nation from the wealth they gained from silver and gold mines in South America. The French, English, and Dutch struggled to control the trade for furs in North America. Furs, especially beaver pelts, were luxury items for the clothing of Europe's rich people. Europeans and Native American tribes fought wars to control this resource. Lumber from North America's huge forests may be considered the original resource that attracted Europeans. Europe had cut down many of its forests by the 1500's and the North American forests could replace those losses. There was no need to plant and no need to mine. The trees were already standing and only needed to be cut down.

Another attractive resource that was ready for use was the vast quantity of fish that filled the waters of the Atlantic Coast. The fishing industry was a major reason why English colonists were successful in New England. Over time many of these American resources were used up the way they had been in the Old World. After about one hundred years much of the silver and gold was gone from the Spanish mines in the Americas. This was one reason why Spain was overtaken by France and then England as the world's greatest power. The fur trade killed off many of the animals of the northeastern part of North America and settlers and Native Americans had to push further to the west to trap animals. Gradually many of the eastern forests were also cut down and the fishing grounds were depleted. Over the last hundred years the peoples of the Americas have developed better processes to replace and conserve the resources that were taken in such large amounts in the centuries after Columbus arrived in America.

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### Columbian Exchange: Effect 5

In the years after Christopher Columbus' voyages, European settlers in the New World (the Americas) quickly set up mining and farming centers that needed lots of laborers. The Spanish set up mines first in the islands of the Caribbean Sea and then in South America. Many European nations set up major farming operations for sugar, tobacco, indigo, and food crops throughout the Americas. Getting enough workers to keep these activities going was a challenge. The Spanish were the first settlers to force the Native Americans to work in mines and on big farms (*encomiendas* - plantations) as slaves. They soon ran into a major problem. The Native Americans died of Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) diseases. In some areas almost the entire workforce could die. Europeans turned to Africa for a solution to the problem. The African slave trade had been set up for hundreds of years. West African tribes raided each other and took many captives. The tribes kept some of these captives for themselves as slaves. Many other slaves were traded away mainly to the Middle East.

The Europeans became new customers for these slave trading tribes. First the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and then the English became the main trading partners for the African tribes' slaves. Using African slaves gave Europeans many advantages over Native American slaves. African slaves were less likely to die of Old World diseases because they had been exposed to them for centuries. Escape and resistance was difficult because the African slaves were separated from their homelands by the Atlantic Ocean. Also setting up the trade was fairly easy because the system had been established by the African tribes for a very long time. The result was the movement of millions of Africans to the New World as slaves. Most went to the territories controlled by Portugal and Spain but many others went to the English, Dutch, and French holdings. In some areas there were more African slaves than free Europeans. An immediate impact was the great wealth that Europeans gained from their slave workers in sugar, rice, tobacco, gold, and silver. One of the longer term results of the African slave trade is the large numbers of people in the Americas of African descent today. Over the centuries this would lead to important social, political, and cultural effects throughout the Americas.

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### **Columbian Exchange: Effect 6**

When Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World (the Americas) the natives spoke many different languages. There were large families of languages (Algonquian and Iroquois) and many smaller subgroups. These languages had developed separately from Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) languages for so long that it is difficult today to determine any exact connection between them. Some of the Native American cultures, like the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas had sophisticated written languages. Others, like the people of the plains of North America, relied more on artwork and storytelling to record their histories. Despite this rich and strong tradition of Native American languages the arrival of the Europeans almost completely swept these original languages away. As Europeans took over areas of the New World they established new governments for their territories in which they spoke the languages of their homelands.

As the Europeans became militarily and politically powerful their languages did, too. It took about four hundred years but by around 1900 the Native Americans were almost completely dominated by Europeans. Today in the Americas the two languages that dominate both continents are Spanish and English. South of the United States Spanish is overwhelmingly the main language. North of Mexico it is English that dominates. There is a notable pocket of French speakers in Canada and Portuguese is spoken in Brazil. All four of these languages are European. There are modern Native Americans who work hard to preserve their original languages. This is a difficult task. Because the culture of the New World is so heavily dominated by European influences Native American languages have been almost entirely replaced by those of the explorers who followed Columbus.

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### **Columbian Exchange: Effect 7**

The European settlers who followed Christopher Columbus to the New World (the Americas) brought new technologies with them. Europeans also learned new techniques from the Native Americans. The example of farming practices that the natives taught English settlers in Plymouth Colony is well known. So are some of the use of natural medicines for treating injuries and illness. However, the influences of Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) technology on America had a greater impact on development there than Native American wisdom had on Europe. Many Native American cultures were skilled metal workers. The Incas and Aztecs are good examples of this. They worked in tin, copper, silver, and gold. The Incas did some limited work with bronze (mixing tin and copper). There even seems to have been some use of iron from meteor deposits. However, Old World people had made great use of bronze for more than three thousand years before Columbus' voyages. Iron was common in much of the Old World for over two thousand years before Columbus. The European settlers were much more advanced than the natives in the use of these metals. Bronze and iron were especially good for tools, armor, and weapons. Native Americans greatly admired the European metal products and traded in order to get them. Bronze and metal weapons and armor gave Europeans a military advantage over the natives, too.

The wheel as a practical piece of technology was developed in Asia almost five thousand years ago. Native Americans understood wheels and even made children's toys with them. However they never developed the wheel into a practical piece of technology to help movement (by developing wagons and carts). This may be because Native Americans had no domesticated draft animals (animals that pull heavy loads like donkeys, oxen, mules, and horse). They just had dogs and llamas. Additional Old World technologies like gunpowder and firearms, and military warships were also major surprises when Native Americans first encountered them. The New World was mainly a group of Stone Age cultures when Columbus sailed there. The technologies that came with the people who followed him would eventually bring the Americas into the modern world. Today the world's greatest economic and military power is in the Americas.

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### Columbian Exchange: Effect 8

When Christopher Columbus came to the New World (the Americas) the Old World (Asia, Africa, and especially Europe) was in the early stages of a development called the Commercial Revolution. This was a lengthy process in improving the way business was done. Developing **accounting** and **banking** systems made it easier to keep track of wealth and to increase wealth. Developing **insurance** systems and new types of **companies** that were owned by many individuals made business less risky. These developments helped make the really big business adventures (like crossing unknown oceans and exploring new worlds) possible. They also helped to make it easier for relatively small nations (like England, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and France) to control territories far away from their homelands.

The great native empires of the New World, the Aztecs and the Incas, had sophisticated systems of record keeping and traded over long distances. However, they were not as advanced as the Europeans in these areas. These shortcomings, along with others, made it impossible for even these impressive American civilizations to expand in the way the Europeans could. When the Europeans established their American empires they brought these commercial (business) systems with them and continued to develop them here. The result was the growth of the Americas as a major financial center over time. By 1900 the United States was financially similar to the greatest European powers. By the end of World War Two North America had become the financial center of the world.